

Message

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<http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/news/ct-ptb-east-chicago-awakening-st-0101-20161230-story.html>

East Chicago lead contamination galvanizes residents

Craig LyonsPost-Tribune

Residents of East Chicago's West Calumet Housing Complex this summer received word of the high levels of lead and arsenic around their homes and Mayor Anthony Copeland ordered them to relocate. In other areas of the Calumet neighborhood, some received letters from the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) detailing the contamination around their homes. Others received requests to take soil samples.

One thing was certain as city and federal officials told residents of the danger that lurked around their homes: It was time for them to act.

"I'm fighting to be heard," West Calumet resident Akeeshea Daniels said.

As news spread of the extent of contamination in the Calumet neighborhood, Daniels and residents across the U.S.S. Lead Superfund site banded together and put pressure on government officials to meet the needs of those affected by the lead and arsenic contamination.

In just a few months, the residents of the Calumet neighborhood worked with the Shriver Center to ensure West Calumet Housing Complex residents have all the resources they need to find safe housing; organized into a series of community groups to put pressure on state and federal officials; and sought a formal role in court proceedings between the EPA, Justice Department and companies held responsible for the contamination in the area.

"The most inspiring piece about watching the residents organize and effect change is that they are accomplishing so much, all while dealing with their own problems — dislocation, health issues and more — caused by this contamination," said Debbie Chizewer, of Northwestern University's Environmental Advocacy Clinic, which is assisting the residents.

As information trickled out about the contamination, it shook the residents.

"I was knocked back a little bit," Daniels said, and she had not gotten any indication from housing officials that her home was contaminated with lead and arsenic.

Once those letters went out, the city and housing authority should have had a plan to help the residents relocate, Daniels said, but they didn't.

In the beginning, Daniels said, officials seemed to think residents would accept what they were told and not check the facts. That wasn't the case.

Activist Sherry Hunter's sister showed her the letter she and the other West Calumet residents received from the mayor ordering them to relocate.

"I stepped into gear," Hunter said.

First, Hunter called state Sen. Lonnie Randolph and the pair organized a meeting at Greater First Baptist Church to hear from the neighborhood's residents. Then, she formed Calumet Lives Matter to help advocate for the residents.

"That's when we hit the pavement," Hunter said.

A group of residents, working with the Shriver Center, filed a complaint with HUD that argued the announcement to vacate the housing complex, because of the high levels of lead and arsenic contamination in the soil, didn't give residents enough time or resources for them to make proper housing choices.

In response, HUD agreed to ensure all eligible residents of the West Calumet Housing Complex have access to relocation benefits, including housing vouchers; waiving any rent owed by residents from July 22 to March 31, or until their tenancy ends; and reimbursing rent paid for November 2016.

"That was beautiful," Hunter said.

By having residents advocate on behalf of the whole community and opening channels of communication with government agencies and officials, they can get at issues where the intent is good but the execution misses the mark, Chizewer said.

"Just having zealous advocates can really improve the outcome," Chizewer said.

As HUD settled the housing complaint, residents throughout the Superfund site realized people didn't have the information they needed, organizing into a series of community groups to demand answers.

Maritza Lopez, who lives in the eastern portion of the Superfund site, first attended an EPA forum about the contamination and clean up in 2012. What few residents attended never had any indication the land was so contaminated, Lopez said, but officials didn't appear to see the urgency.

"This is Pompeii," Lopez said. "This is going to blow up."

Lopez began researching and talked to neighbors about what she learned about the Superfund site. Lopez said the moment had come for people to step up and organize.

"Let's go and let's do this to help everybody out," Lopez said.

People from a number of community groups put their efforts together and formed a community advisory group — dubbed East Chicago Calumet Coalition — to communicate residents' needs and questions to the EPA.

"We're pushing forward hard," Lopez said. "We're one united force."

Another group went to city hall and presented Copeland with a list of grievances.

In response, Copeland agreed to weekly meetings with the residents to report on what's happening in the neighborhood, Chizewer said. That's holding the city accountable, she said.

Residents can take pride because the pressure they put on the city likely led to the letters Copeland sent to Gov. Mike Pence and Governor-elect Eric Holcomb asking for a disaster declaration, Chizewer said.

Lopez said the groups' efforts are to safeguard the residents and protect their homes and livelihood.

"We're speaking from our heart and we're taking it out there," Lopez said.

Residents are giving the mayor a different point of view about what's happening in the Calumet neighborhood, Daniels said.

"It's making a difference," Daniels said.

Chizewer said students are taught at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law's Environmental Advocacy Clinic that there's more than one lever to pull when there's an environmental problem, including legal avenues, political pressure and raising awareness.

"This case is a perfect example of how all the levers have been activated," Chizewer said.

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Sincerely,

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